DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 182 478 CE 023 999

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TITLE A Rational Approach to Historiography: Misuses and Abuses of History. Symposium on Historiography: the Revisionist and the Progressive Historical Interpretations of Vocational Education andCurrent Implications.
INSTITUTION Texas A and M Univ., College Station. Coll. of Education.
PUB DATE 4 Dec 79
NOTE 11p.: Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Vocational Association (Anaheim, CA, December 4, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational History: Educational Research: *Historical Criticism: *Historical Reviews; *Historiography: Motivation: Research Methodology; Social Action: Social Change: Standards; *Validity; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS Revisionism

ABSTRACT

To knowledgeably debate with revisionist historians regarding the early history of vocational education and the social intentions of early leaders, vocational educators should focus attention on three general questions regarding (1) the validity of historical research, (2) motives of historical researchers, and (3) the kind of research responsibility necessary for any field of endeavor. The first question is concerned with the appropriate methodology for interpreting history. Controversy centers on the ways in which the validity of historical interpretation can be judged and on the existence of standards of precision and credibility. Much revisionist criticism may be due to misinterpretation. The second question concerns varying motives of historical researchers which can lead to conflicting interpretations. Centered at liberal centers of social activism, revisionists see historical interpretation as a method of bringing social change. Vocational education must respond to this political, not historical, debate with close examination of methodology and demands for standards of precision and credibility and not with selective reporting. The third question concerns why vocational education is remiss in interpreting its history and philosophy. To counteract damage done by political interpretations by historians and historiographers, vocational education must assume responsibility for interpreting its own history and philosophies and accelerate its emphasis on historiography. (YLB)

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A RATIONAL APPROACH TO HISTORIOGRAPHY: MISUSES AND ABUSES OF HISTORY

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Symposium on Historiography: The Revisionist and the Progressive Historical Interpretations of Vocational Education and Current Implications (National Convention of the American Vocational Association held at Anaheim, California - December 4, 1979)

CE 023 999

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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You have heard conflicting interpretations and viewpoints here today about the early history of vocational education. Harvey Kantor has very adeptly presented the revisionist historian viewpoint regarding education and work - the viewpoint that seems to be dominant in the field of educational history today.

And you have heard Rupert Evans tell us that vocational educators do not have alot of evidence to appraise or refute the interpretations of the revisionists although we in the field of vocational education inherently and instinctively believe that we have been a more liberating force for people than a controlling force. Dr. Evans also reminds us that the field of vocational education has been more interested heretofore in our present than in our past.

As a field, we, as vocational educators, have neither addressed the questions of interpretation from a scholarly viewpoint, nor have we monitored the historical debates very well...even though vocational education has become a primary target for attack in regard to the early intentions and approaches of our own early leaders--particularly David Snedden and Charles A. Prosser.

How does a field such as vocational education, that is being targeted by a group of bright scholars such as the revisionist historians, respond regarding the negative charges about our early history and the social intentions of our early leaders.

Do we simply acquise, saying "you are the experts in history. You must be right; we will reject our past as inappropriate, as socially damaging, as heretofore controlling for people rather than strengthening? We shall shun our past and perhaps redefine ourselves for the future."

Or, do we enter into the debate with all the strength of our field - and all the resources that are available to us. Not in a defensive posture, but through scholarly interchange. Knowing that we do have a proud tradition in providing economic and social opportunity for people who otherwise had none. I think you know the answer. We must enter the debate and in so doing, there are questions we must ask. I will focus my remarks around three general questions regarding (1) the validity of historical research, (2) motives of historical researchers, and (3) the kind of research responsibility necessary for any field of endeavor.

Validity of Historical Research

How do we judge the validity of historical interpretation?

Are there standards of precision and credibility?

This first question - concerning validity is creating tremendous tension and strain within the field of educational history due to its disputes over appropriate methodology for interpreting history. The controversy centers over the question of what is historical research and is there a discipline of historical research. There is yet no generally accepted answer - the debate continues as to whether scientific investigations based on the past can be conducted.

Validity is defined by two opposing camps. There are those representing the revisionist position such as Michael Katz who says:

> No historian can entirely divorce the categories with which he approaches the contemporary world from those with which he studies the past. Our concerns shape the questions that we ask and, as a consequence, determine what we select from virtually unlimited supply of "fact". That state of affairs remains submerged and implicit in most historical work.

Taking a view quite different from Katz, other historians warn of the historical research fallacy of "presentism"...when the imposition of modern thought patterns are used as criteria for judging the past - when evidence becomes too selective, rather than inclusive and the interpretation of a past era becomes a biased interpretation.... Sol Cohen, Rush Welter, Diane Ravitch warn about this problem in interpretation.

Sol Cohen has consistently outlined the abuses of the past in particular works of educational historians over the past few years. He sees the practices of Michael Katz, Clarence Karier, Joel Spring, Paul Violas and to some extent, David Tyack as suspect records of history. He would classify their contributions as more politically propogandic than as accurate portrayals of history. He asserts that the new breed of historian does not believe in American and its potential, but spew an apriori hostility toward American schools, American society, and the liberal tradition defined by the progressive era in this country.

Cohen accuses the revisionist historians of asking such loaded questions of the evidence that they could be fairly sure at the beginning what answer would emerge at the end...They have not tried to <u>understand</u> the past - the traditional role of the historian, but they have wanted to condemn it.... They have oversimplified the ambiguity, the incompleteness, and the complexity of historical events.

R. Freeman Butts joins Cohen in criticizing the radical revisionist:

> I find the radical revisionists view of history faulty and their prescriptions for the future unconvincing. Their treatment of historical materials is suspect and their narrow-class-based conception of social change unacceptable.

My own review and critique of the literature of the revisionist historians regarding Snedden and Prosser uncovered fallacies of presentism,

selectivity, and bias in the interpretation of intent and motivation by our leaders. Judging Snedden and Prosser against definitions and concepts that Snedden and Prosser would be unfamiliar with and taking their own comments and judging them in terms of contemporary value preferences and concepts rather than those normed during 1900 to 1917 have been consistent fallacies.

The debates between David Snedden and John Dewey have been overemphasized and represented as final and representative by the revisionists positions. The interpretations present vocational education as antiacademic and narrow in perspective because Snedden disagreed with Dewey regarding an integrated curriculum concept. Snedden rejected Dewey's suggestions because he felt Dewey's position would not accomodate immediate economic problems of youth; Dewey did not offer implementation features for his counter position to Snedden's.

David Snedden debated many people other than John Dewey. In the course of attempting to define a new, more utilitarian form of educational philosophy for the public schools, he debated Dewey because Progressivism as it was being defined could not accomodate the goals that Snedden saw for the schools - that of actual job preparation for work. He debated Bagley, the father of Essentialism, over what actually comprised an essential curriculum because Bagley did not see vocational education as a basic component for the public schools. Later on in the 1930's he debated Counts, the leader of Reconstructionism in this country, over methods of incorporating new curriculum into the public schools. All these debates were equally important - but they were meant to simply clarify the vocational education philosophic position. They did not represent unyielding positions of an anti-academic nature nor permanent gaps between humanity and technology as described by A. J. Wirth in his vocational/liberal controversy.

I found that Drost, in interpreting David Snedden, selected just enough information to provide evidence for the viewpoint he hoped Snedden had represented. As an example, he used evidence that Snedden had enrolled in courses in Stanford University taught by Ross, a leading social control advocate, therefore Drost interpreted Snedden as a social control advocate. He failed to include that Snedden enrolled the following years in courses taught by John Dewey at Columbia, representing an opposite viewpoint to Ross...and that over the years Snedden was closer and more intimately associated with Dewey than with Ross. This account was entirely missing. But instead selective material and untenable cause/effort examples became the evidence to present Snedden in a negative rather than positive manner. There are many examples of this kind of selective reporting in the interpretation by the revisionists of the intentions of the early leaders of vocational education.

Definitions regarding equal opportunity and social efficiency, liberalism and conservatism, were used to evaluate the discussions and written contributions of our early leaders, without supplying the definitions that these leaders had used, understood, and accepted in the context of their own writing. "Equal opportunity of results" has been subsituted for "equal opportunity for treatment" and used for the yardstick to judge the early leaders, even though this concept was not popular until the 1960's. Thus errors of presentism and misrepresentation have been used to interpret the early history of vocational education.

If we find that vocational education was in fact an invidious scheme, as interpreted by the revisionists, we today want to recognize this condition, but we need valid methodology in order to appraise such criticism.

Motives of Historical Researches

Our second overall question today centers on why are there conflicting interpretations and a tremendous overbalance of the revisionist interpretations? There seems to be hidden agendas that need to be brought into the open.

The radical revisionists interpretations came into vogue during the 1960's; it is not surprising that this form of interpretation has been centered in the liberal centers of social activism in this country. Leading scholars at Berkely, Stanford, and the University of Wisconsin have sponsored, secured funding, and continue to promote historical research of a revisionist nature. These centers of liberal social reform in this country see historical interpretation as a method of bringing social change. Thus history is used as a weapon toward social reconstruction and social action. The pen is mightier than the sword and as it turns out historical interpretation is more subtle but more lasting than protest marches.

Once this is recognized, then such interpretations can be responded to on their own grounds and their own merits. The debate no longer becomes a historical debate, but a political debate.

Our field must respond, not through similar methodology of selective reporting, but through close examination of methodology and demands for standards of precision and credibility. We can make known that the interpretations do not represent historical scholarship as much as social-action strategies.

We must lay out the problem before our policy-makers, our professional associations, and before Congress. We cannot afford to permit interpretations under the guise of history to be used as political instruments to

thwart our own goals in providing opportunities for people who need assistance in preparing for work...and then we must strengthen our efforts to provide valid interpretations of our historical intent and our future mission.

Research Responsibilities for a Field of Endeavor

The third general question concerns why is our field remiss in interpreting our own history and therefore our philosophy.

As long as methods of traditional history were being used, vocational education apparently felt comfortable in relying on historians and historiographers to interpret our past. But the rules of historical research have changed. We can no longer rely on this field to monitor itself when unreliable and invalid methods are used nor to actively counteract the damage to vocational education created by political interpretations.

We as a field have preferred to conduct research related to practice - to leave more basic forms of inquiry to other disciplines. But now the field of vocational education must assume responsibility for interpreting its own history, and its own philosophys.

How well are we prepared to take on this new critical research domain and how can we quickly assume the responsibility. You must help supply the answers.

* * *

This session today builds the case for the field of vocational education to accelerate its emphasis on historiography and to launch a rational approach to appraising other interpretations as well as taking up the task of interpreting our own.

It calls on AVERA to take the lead in establishing committees or strategies for strengthening our research capacity in historigraphy.

Perhaps the real question will be, can a field which has itself an overbalance in quantitative methodology provide a better balance of alternative research methods to approach critical problems of interpretation in our field.

We hope the answer is yes. Our silent response to critics, in part because of research voids, can no longer be sustained.

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